

Why Should a Conservation Commission do a Timber Harvest?

Larry Spencer, Chair, Holderness Conservation Commission

There are very few places in New Hampshire that have never been harvested. In fact, various sources indicate that between 80 to 85% of New Hampshire had been cleared by the end of the 19th century. Of course, when we look at the hillsides and valleys in our town today, we know that is no longer true. We like the new view and of course the change in fall colors is one of the things that entices folks to come visit NH. Since the forests have come back, why should a Conservation Commissions bother with timber harvests? To a certain extent, one of the reasons is associated with our name. We are a conservation commission, not a preservation commission. Conservation is widely defined as the “wise use of natural resources”. Although there may be situations when a conservation group might want to preserve a parcel of land, more often than not, the commission wants to manage a parcel by harvesting timber from the parcel.

Over the past two years the Holderness Conservation Commission has done a timber harvest on two parcels that the group manages in Holderness. My remarks will be associated with only one, the Pilote Forest. Many years ago the Pilote Forest was obtained from the Pilote family. The family had purchased a large parcel in central Holderness and had done one cut on the parcel after their purchase. They were willing to sell to the town 107 acres of the parcel, retaining five acres for their homesite. The town applied for and received a grant from the NH Land Conservation Investment Program (now the Land Conservation and Heritage Investment Program) to purchase the property. Soon thereafter, the commission hired George Frame of Feather Ledge Forestry to do a forest inventory of the property. That inventory identified a number of actions that the commission should take to maintain a healthy and viable forest. I will now delineate those.

One of the main outcomes of the work was the identification and mapping of different forest stands within the property. One often thinks of a forest as being a mixture of trees in a random pattern, but in actuality a forest consists of a number of different stands. A stand is identified as a group of trees of the same species all located near each other. Some of these stands were actually trees that were near the end of their life span and for good regeneration to take place should be harvested.

A second outcome was the identification of a number of trees that showed some state of disease. Many white pines had a problem with needle loss in the crown of the trees. Many of the beech trees showed indications of the beech bark disease. Again, to maintain a sustainable forest, these trees needed to be harvested to allow replacement by healthy new trees.

In hiking through the property, George noticed a number of springs and seeps. He indicated in his report that if the commission were to make these areas a bit larger, we could enhance the wildlife on the property. Ecologically speaking, wildlife likes transition zones, that is, the areas between clearings and the forest proper. As part of the cut that we did on the property, the

logger opened up a three acre clearing which has now been stumped, seed with local plants and mowed to keep it as a meadow in the future.

Another reason for some of the smaller clear cuts was to open up view sites in some of the steeper areas of the property (primarily the eastern boundary). This also means that the commission will be cutting new trails to take hikers to the view sites. We have applied for additional funding through multiple sources.

The inventory sat on the shelf for a while as George mentioned that there was no hurry to do most of the suggested actions. Finally, three years ago, the commission hired a licensed forester, Tom Hahn of FORECO, to carry out the suggested actions. Since logging is usually only done in the winter, the cuts were started on the Town Forest in the winter of 2014-15 and then continued on the Pilote Forest the same year with the concluding work done the winter of 2015-16 on the Pilote Forest. With heavy equipment on the property, we were also able to move some telephone poles on to the property to construct two new bridges, one for the existing trail that passes through the middle of the property and another for a new trail that will branch off of the existing trail.

The commission held an open house, with short tours of both properties at the Town and Pilote Forests on the 15th of October to show participants first-hand the outcome of the two forest cuts.